

Taking the Unsafe out of the Unexpected

Some recent incidents have caused handlers to be injured by their cats. The FCF Accreditation Committee would like for everyone to read this and examine your own procedures and precautions you take while being in with your exotic cats.

We have all seen professional handlers working their cats, doing amazing hands-on activities. Many of us have our own cats that we are tempted to do the same things with. We hear all the time how, “My cat would never...whatever.” In almost every instance of an attack causing injury or death, we also hear, “The cat has never...whatever.” The lesson to be learned here is that there is a first time for everything. Just because something hasn’t happened in the past doesn’t mean that it can never happen given the right circumstances. We wear seatbelts in our vehicles, not because we are expecting to be in a crash, but because we want to be prepared if we are in one.

To be safe, please give thought to two things:

First, what kind of instances could cause the cat to do the unexpected? This is usually caused by fear, excitement, or natural instinct. Depending on the individual cat’s temperament, any multitude of things could scare the cat and cause it to react instinctively. Loud noises like thunder, fireworks, applause, or any sudden loud noise can trigger fear. Sudden or unexpected movements can also scare a cat. Even little things like a bee stinging the cat can cause a bad situation. Sometimes a cat can become over stimulated by excitement, causing displaced aggression. This means that the cat may be angry or excited by something else, but it misplaces this aggression to the closest object near to it. That could be you. In big cats, small children moving around can cause over excitement, as well as things like balls, other animals...virtually anything. While you should always keep your attention on the cat, you must also constantly be aware of what else is going on around you and take preemptive action if it is something you can control. Natural instincts still

rule a cat even if it was hand raised and is tame. Wild felines are natural predators and the natural instinct for an easy meal remains, no matter how far removed from the wild. Show any domestic house cat a baby chick, and almost every time, you’ll see them go into a predatory mode, even though they have been removed from the wild for hundreds of years. Exotic cats are exactly the same. Many people have been attacked simply because they fell down. This is what happened to Roy Horn of Siegfried and Roy. This has happened many times. A person familiar with the cat falls down and the cat instinctively goes for the neck even though it would never hurt the person under normal circumstances.

Any and all of these things, plus countless others can cause the unfortunate unexpected. 99.99% of the time, these things may not cause a reaction. It is that 0.01% of time that can cause severe injury or even death. If you prepare yourself for that fraction of a percent that could end up being a life and death situation, the better odds you have of preventing the situation from ever arising.

The second thing you should think about is carrying some sort of protective or defensive device at all times when you are in direct contact with a cat. The professional trainers of this age may not carry a pistol on their side like the Clyde Beatty era, but be assured that they have something on them. Tasers and pepper spray come in small easily concealed containers. Trainers may not carry the chair of times gone by, but they will have some sort of whip or stick that could save them seconds that may allow them to survive.

These protective devices can be effective, but some more so than others. Fire extinguishers can be very effective, but there have been times when the second time a cat sees and hears one, it may not be

nearly as effective. They can also be expensive and require frequent testing so that when the time comes that it is needed, you don’t just get a fizzle. Water hoses can be effective, but only if it has enough pressure to knock the cat over. While a cat may hate a water hose under normal situations, if it is agitated, it may have no effect. Tranquilizers take too long to be effective and what normally would kill the cat may have zero effect due to the adrenalin during a situation. Electrical shock devices also must have knock down power, such as a taser. Normal “hot shots” just don’t have the power to diffuse an enraged cat. Pepper spray has proven to be highly effective. It causes great temporary pain, but does not cause permanent injury. It is effective every time, cheap, and easy to carry.

In addition to those devices that may be able to back a cat off, carrying a long staff, asp, or nightstick can be invaluable. You can use these to fend the cat off as you make your way to safety. They can also be used to pry open a mouth if the cat is clamped down on you. They can be used to shove down the throat to get a gag reflex to release a bite. These items can really save you or someone else, but are no substitute for avoiding the situation to start with.

The most important thing you can have with you is other people. They can be used as spotters to warn of potential situations, to help you escape, to provide first aid, to call for help, and to help contain the cat once you have been extricated.

Please everyone, put some thought into your procedures and practices and prepare for the unexpected. One small mistake could lead to your injury or death and give ammunition to those who want to see our cats removed from us. Whether you have lions and tigers or servals and Geoffroy’s use precaution to keep yourself and your cats safe. Being macho and lying in a hospital or morgue is not so cool. Being a responsible owner who does the best to protect the safety of yourself, the public, and your cherished cats is cool.

—Doc Antle and Kevin Chambers

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